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ABSTRACT

Educational thinking in America was once strongly activist. Schools had a part to play in social evolution and were an important factor in social progress. This paper shows how passivity and powerlessness is built into the deepest assumptions of current educational thinking. It provides an overview of modernist theory and postmodern accounts, and asserts that both share pre-Darwinian assumptions. The paper suggests that reform will require a different attitude and way of thinking, one that is more in tune with the post-Darwinian evolutionary assumptions of pragmatist philosophers such as William James. If one adopted a more Darwinian kind of view, as William James did, then one might see humans as busily engaged in trying to create better lives in an uncertain and changing world. Rather than taking things as given, as defined by a set of rules, or assuming that one must rebel against all such rules, people then can use different sets of rules to aid their own adaptation. In short, if theorizing is viewed as a tool for change, people may not be so prone to modern passivity or postmodern powerlessness. (Contains 15 references.) (LMI)

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Passivity and Powerlessness in Educational Thought[1]

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Introduction

Educational thinking in America was once strongly activist. Schools were thought to be a way to bring about a better, more democratic society and to foster the development of the more mindful people required by such a democracy. Schools were, of course, a part of the wider society and only one institution among many. Nevertheless, they had a part to play in social evolution; they were an important factor in social progress.

The Progressives who held this view developed an educational theory consistent with their evolutionary view of change. They thought of human mental life--mind--as a product of evolution. Human social life, and the kind of reflective thinking that it made possible, was a product of natural evolution. At the same time, human mental life also had an important role to play in future evolution by adapting the physical environment and, even, by changing the social conditions that had produced it in the first place. As William James declared, "The knower is an actor.....Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action--action which to a great extent transforms the world--help to *make* the truth which they declare" (James, 1956/1897b, 70). Consistent with this view, James saw the universe as "unfinished," a story still being written. He also saw the universe as "pluralistic" (James, 1920). A variety of agents and processes pushing this way and that, interacted to produce varied and unpredictable outcomes. The universe, in short, was evolving much as Darwinian species evolve, and no one could know for sure where it would go. In such an evolving universe life will always be a gamble because knowledge is partial and uncertain, and no agent can totally determine the outcome. James concluded that taking up this gamble, having faith enough to live life fully under conditions of flux and uncertainty, was what made a life worth living (James, 1956/1897a).

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James' upbeat tone is in striking contrast with the much of today's thinking. Hadn't he heard of incommensurable cultural and ideological differences making common understanding impossible? Why was he so naive as to overlook differences in power, such as in class, gender and racial hierarchies, or in the growth of modern forms of rational organization and instrumentalist ideologies? While many may feel less despairing today than a few years ago, there is still great pessimism in many quarters. Modernism seems to have failed in its promises and brought nasty side-effects, and James and the other pragmatists seem a part of the earlier modernizing process. In this context, post-modernists have been all too happy to point out the failings of modernism, showing it to be complicitous in the creation of a dominated and fragmented form of social life. While much contemporary debate is framed in terms of modern versus post-modern ways of thinking, the striking thing, at least to me, is how both streams of thought conduce to passivity and powerlessness. Both tend to assume people are passive or powerless in ways that would be startling to those of the Progressive era.

Showing how passivity and powerlessness is built into the deepest assumptions of current educational thinking is one purpose of this paper. In it I will mostly talk about modernist theory because that seems to be what most operative educational theory can be characterized as. After discussing modernist theory, I'll briefly suggest that post-modern accounts share much the same problem. I'll end by suggesting that reform will require a different attitude and way of thinking, one that is more in tune with the post-Darwinian evolutionary assumptions of pragmatists, like James.

Modernist Theory

Most of the important theories in use in education today could be considered modernist. By "modernist" I mean two things: First, such theories assume that the form or structure of the system being analyzed is given. Its boundaries, and the boundaries of its parts, are fixed. Second, such theories assume that the system being considered operates according to fixed laws. In other words, the interactions between the system and other systems, or between the different parts of the system, are also fixed in character.[2]

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[2] These two assumptions may imply one another but it may make understanding the position easier to state them separately.

By this definition modernism is basically the same as mechanism. Once a system of interacting parts is defined, with known laws of interaction, it is relatively easy to predict how the machine will "run," i.e., how the parts will interact over time. The interacting parts take different states over time and different relationships with one another, much like the pistons, valves and other parts of an engine. While modernism may not be commonly equated with mechanism, many modernist lines of thought in education and the social sciences seem to align with this conception pretty well. In the end the point of focusing on modernism in this way is to aid perception, enabling us to see some commonalities between a wide set of social theories, not to create a rigid category for placing theories or theorists in or out of the "modern" box.

Modernist theories as defined here fall into two principal sub-classes. The first consists of all modernist theories that explain behavior in terms of the structure of the "outer" environment. Behaviorists, for example, used the structure of environmental contingencies as the sole explanation for an organism's behavior, viewing all appeal to "inner" causes as illegitimate (Skinner, 1953). Those in sociology who appeal to social-structural explanations of behavior, such as relations of class, race or gender, tend to place a similar emphasis on the environment. In education, those who see schools as mirroring the society, or as otherwise adapting to a given social environment, tend to adopt a similarly environment-centered account. All of these theories see the rules or laws governing behavior as environmental, or external to the "individual" under analysis.

The second subclass of modernist theories includes all those whose principal explanation for behavior is the "inner" structure of the "individual" being studied. Traditional intelligence testers, for example, saw behavior (relative test performance) as determined by "intelligence," or "g" (standing for "general" intelligence), which was thought to be a native endowment. Cognitive theorists focus on the structure of an individual's mind as the explanation for behavior. They see symbolic structures or schemata in the head as explaining what people will learn or how they will act. Anthropologists focusing on cultural structure, such as the organization of terms or categories in use in a given society, adopt a similar orientation, viewing this structure as the cause of people's behavior or ways of talking. Those emphasizing how changes in school reforms are adapted to the inner "grammar" of schooling adopt a similar position (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In all of these accounts some structure or set of rules inside of the system is viewed as determining its behavior.

What is common to all of these theories is that they take the form or structure of the system as given, and assume that behavior is determined by this structure. This is no great discovery, since it was part of my definition of modernist theories to begin with, but it is interesting to see how many theories can be easily described in terms of these assumptions. For the externally-minded, like behaviorists, the rules are in the environment, while for the internally-minded, like cognitivists, they are inside the organism, or inside the cranium. In taking the system and the rules governing it as fixed, both assume that the individual is not developing or growing. Put another way, none of these accounts is an evolutionary one in which the *form* of the thing being considered changes.

Early modernists thought there were simple rules describing how one state led to another. The French philosopher, Auguste Comte, for example, sought laws describing social statics and dynamics just like the (elementary) laws of physics (Comte, 1896). His search for the laws of social dynamics resulted in his famous law of three stages: all systems of thought go from a theological to a metaphysical to a positive stage. (One may laugh at the simplicity of this view, but it is extremely close to the Piagetian or Kohlbergian account of development). Early behaviorists, like Watson, similarly sought laws relating stimulus and response which would allow one to predict the response given the stimulus (Watson, 1930/1924). And early cognitive psychologists--the IQ testers--sought simple rules of performance, such as higher IQ = higher relative performance (essentially a tautology).

As modernism became more sophisticated, deeper rules or laws were sought. Rather than finding a set of simple laws which relate one state to another, laws were sought which related changes in states to other changes in state. Skinner gave up on Watson's effort to predict the particular response an organism would make to a given stimulus, and chose, instead, to predict *changes* in response intensity resulting from *changes* in reinforcement.[3] In effect, rather than using simple laws like the elementary gas laws (e.g., Pressure = Temperature/Volume), more complex laws based on differential equations were used as the model.

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[3] This and other comments on learning theory are developed much more fully in (Bredo, 1996).

More recently, modernist theories have also incorporated qualitative as well as quantitative change. The development of computational techniques for manipulating strings of symbols, as in computer languages like Lisp and Prolog, led to the development of systems which use rules to transform one symbol structure into another. Theories of problem-solving (Simon, 1979) and language interpretation and generation (e.g., Chomsky) based on such rules could then be developed. The consequences for performance of using different sets of rules, such as those of "novices" versus "experts" could also be investigated. What makes these newer approaches "modernist," or gives them modernist aspects despite the fact that they consider structures that change, is that they continue to assume that the system is well-defined and operates according to fixed rules. Thus at the most basic level of analysis the system being modeled remains a machine.

Passivity in Modern Theory

A mechanistic analysis can be extremely useful. Logical or mechanical systems can be used to model endless varieties of things at arbitrary levels of depth, giving them far greater power and flexibility than is commonly recognized (Kowalski, 1979). Difficulties arise, however, when we view ourselves as machines, as bounded systems operating according to fixed rules. To the extent that we believe such models, or, perhaps better put, confuse ourselves with our own models, we see ourselves as creatures who do not develop or evolve. We are fixed and defined and can only hope to understand the character of our fixedness so we can work within it.

I will argue that all such theories presuppose a passive organism. They presuppose a given structure constraining behavior which the actor is, by assumption, able to understand but unable to change. As a result, there is no place in the theory for changes in this underlying system. While there is a form of humility in accepting one's limitations which can be useful and appealing, mostly it seems that these limitations arise from the unsubstantiated *assumptions* of a given theory. That is, they are prior assumptions built into the approach rather than findings which it enables one to reach. Such assumptions may simply be blinders, the results of limited imagination. Since much of modern thought has been guided by mechanistic assumptions, as suggested here, it is important to be aware of the degree to which these are assumptive beginnings not conclusions. In particular, it is important to be aware of the practical consequences of adopting such assumptions, such as a predilection towards certain forms of passivity. Such passivity is particularly evident in theories which focus on the structure

of the environment, since these tend to downplay individual differences and individual voluntarism.

External Structures

The passivity implicit in theories which focus on the environment, such as Skinnerian behaviorism, is pretty obvious. In such accounts the organism can act and affect its environment only in the sense that different responses bring about different outcomes, such as a certain reinforcing stimulus. However, it is assumed that the structure of the contingency itself--whichever one is being investigated--is beyond the organism's control. As a result, the organism is viewed as adapt to given environmental contingencies until it "learns" them. But this definition of "learning" makes it amazingly conformist. If you conform to the contingencies I mediate then I am likely to say you have "learned." But this ignores the ways in which you may also change me, and the ways in which our interaction may be governed by evolving or negotiated rules.

Something like this account holds for all modernist theories focusing on the environment. In sociological accounts, for example, people are seen as occupying different places in a social structure--different classes, genders, or races, for example. In a simple analysis these are simply environmental variables affecting their fates, such as in status-attainment research in which one's SES affects one's educational attainment. In a more complex analysis, those in different social-structural locations are seen as facing different contingencies, to which they adapt in different ways. Some analyses emphasize main effects, others interaction effects, but both view environmental contingencies as the determining thing.

But what self-respecting organism does not try to change the contingencies facing it? People alter their environments all the time, greatly affecting the contingencies they face, such as by building homes around themselves, insulating themselves from variations in temperature or in other factors that might otherwise have required changes in activity to alter. They change their social environments by coopting them, bribing them, and interacting in such a way as to create a different type of relationship, i.e., a different type of contingency. They alter environments by leaving them. We drive to a better restaurant or even leave the country when things get too bad. There are also more subtle ways in which the bearing of a given contingency on our behavior may be modified. Most of us do not face one set of contingencies. We face multiple contingencies coupled to at least some degree with one another in space and time. As a

result we need to prioritize these contingencies; tackle one before another so as to untangle their interdependent threads. In effect, we put a given contingency in a different context. The current demands--Skinner's, or some other--may come first, but they may not. They may be fitted into a course of life in different ways, giving them different meaning. In terms of actual practice, then, there isn't just one environment "out there."

Thus, there are a number of ways in which an alert actor may alter the environment, including altering its structure, leaving it, or redefining it. All of these ways of changing the game are assumed away in modernist accounts, with the result that "learning" means conforming to a pre-defined environmental situation, rather than reorganizing or reframing that situation. Adaptive behavior that alters the structure of the environment, or the ways in which it bears on the organism, tend to be made invisible by strong experimental controls (those hungry, caged rats had good reason to see things Skinner's way) and by accounting systems that treat all variation from the focal contingency as random (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989). The assumption that people do not adapt in these system-modifying ways is a truly limiting one, for it makes modernist theory blind to these interesting adaptive phenomena.

Theories which emphasize the structure of the environment tend, also, to be blind to individual variation. All individuals of the same generic type are basically the same to them. All rats or pigeons were the same to Skinner, varying only in terms of their performance in his system, such as their rate of learning. Those emphasizing the importance of class structure, similarly do not consider the different cultures or histories of people in that class for these factors are irrelevant to their analysis. Schools systems similarly take all first graders as the "same" as far as they are concerned, placing them all in the same "class." Taking all individuals as the same results in being unable to explain different reactions to a given set of contingencies. The point is an important one because the "same" structural conditions, viewed from an external standpoint, will have different effects depending on their meaning for those experiencing them. Of course no theory can explain everything, but it is rare for an environmental account to acknowledge this limitation. Instead, "individual" variation is treated as random and swept under the rug. What is unrecognized is that the inability to handle it is a result of the initial assumptions undergirding the analysis.

Internal Structures

Things would seem to be quite different for those focusing on inner factors, such as cognitive or cultural theorists. After all, "inner" factors, such as different conceptual or cultural frameworks tend to be viewed as the source of all variation and freedom. Organismic or internal accounts tend, accordingly, to be voluntaristic, in contrast to the determinism of environmental accounts. They emphasize all the ways an individual can take things differently rather than in the same way. For instance a gestalt account emphasizes the different ways in which the "same" pattern may be taken. Contemporary cognitive accounts suggest how different sets of rules, different schemata, lead to taking different paths in solving a problem. Cultural accounts suggest how different groups take the "same" thing differently. If "what you make of it depends on how you take it" [Goodman, 1978 #55], organismic accounts tend to emphasize the different ways.

When the focus is on internal structures it seems there is more novelty, more freedom, than in an environmental account. But these differences are themselves viewed as determined by a given set of rules which the actors cannot change. This fixity of the individual is pretty obvious in older theories, such as the psychometric conception of intelligence. Here individuals vary in degree but not in kind. IQ, while "inner," is not something that is viewed as changing. Chomskyian theory is, of course, "deeper" in the sense that it focuses less on surface behavior--getting the answers to an IQ test--and instead on the rules by which behavior is generated, including those constraining all languages. Since these rules are very general, very "deep," many languages are possible. But these languages are seen as staying within the general constraints Chomsky outlined, which are presumed to be unchangeable. Modern cognitive theories, such as computational theories of cognition, similarly see individuals as working with varying sets of rules. Within some given set of primitives the individual may learn or add new generalizations to long term memory, but the primitives themselves must remain constant, for there is no way to change them without creating unacceptable control problems (Winograd & Flores, 1986).

All of these inward looking theories thus presuppose some sort of framework, some norms or rules regulating behavior, which is not itself subject to change. These are theories of agents that do not develop or evolve. But who does not at some point gain a new concept or participate in a new type of activity? Who does not reframe a given problem, or develop a new attitude towards it? Once again it seems that these are

theories of passive agents who take things as given, although in this case the givenness is seen to reside inside of them rather than being determined externally. They are theories of static rule-followers rather than practical agents acting dynamically in the world.

Where environment-centered theories took all individuals as identical, these organism-centered theories take all environments as identical (relative to the categories in their rules). But this leads to insensitivity to unique features of the present environment. It leads to an insensitivity to the environment's history or particularity, since it is only approached using a given rule-set. For this reason a rule-ridden individual will not be able to fully appreciate or take advantage of the particular environment they face.

Perhaps this is enough to suggest the passivity in modernist theory. By presupposing given systems operating according to given rules, such theories do no allow for development or growth. By beginning with fixed structures they make it impossible to understand how such structures change. Ultimately both inner and outer versions of modernist theory presuppose passivity--the acceptance of given rules that actors cannot affect or even adopt a different relationship to. By taking us to be machines, such theories make it difficult to see how we might be alive.

Powerlessness in Postmodern Theory

While the focus of this paper is primarily on modernist theory it is all too tempting to criticize post-modern theorizing on the way, but I will do so only briefly. To the extent that one can characterize post-modern theory in general, "it" can be seen as a rejection of the modernist assumption of a fixed position, a fixed description of how things really are. Thus the definition of the system as that particular system would be rejected, as would the definition of the system's rules of interaction. The distinction between the inside and outside of the system would have to go as well, since it depends upon the clear boundaries defining the system in the first place.

The principal objection to the modernist approach is that it is imperialistic. It says, in effect, "This is the way the world is." But this very univocal and fixed definition shuts off other ways of conceiving of things, other "ways the world is" [Goodman, 1972 #110]. It also shuts down a recognition of that even a given way may be changing as "things" are understood differently over time within a tradition (MacIntyre, 1984). Modernism, in short, is an exercise in "power." It is an attempt to shut down the

conversation by eliminating the possibility for other, changing conceptions to come into play. This criticism of modernism seems an excellent one. It is also in line with what I have suggested above about the non-dialogical, non-evolving character of modernist theory. These are theories of dead machines, not live creatures.

Unfortunately, post-modern thought too often becomes merely reactive to modern thought. It is a protest, a criticism. As such, it requires the notion of a system with fixed rules to criticize. Post-modern efforts to undermine or disrupt the system require belief in a well-defined "system" to disrupt. Perhaps the system is the system of power relations, for example, which is seen as determining patterns of discourse. One may then oppose that "system," continually seeking to disrupt systemic talk. But of course in seeing "it" as a system one has fallen into modernist assumptions oneself. I'm reminded of some colleagues who have become enamored of post-modern thought, leading them to reach conclusions such as: "All generalization is impossible," or "All knowledge is subjective," or "I'm against all categorization," or "We should be against all norms" or "
We should not reach definite conclusions." The paradoxical and self-defeating nature of these assertions sometimes escapes the ardent post-modernist's attention. Such people are apparently unaware that in taking these positions they have become what they oppose. The more thoughtful post-modernist recognizes that his or her own discourse is paradoxical. It is self-disruptive even as it is disruptive of others. This is a good insight, but it seems to lead to self-defeating behavior, to self-erasure, and to a certain lack of seriousness, because adopting a serious attitude while recognizing that the stance is paradoxical is even more absurd.

Such post-modern gymnastics seem to arise from adopting assumptions that are shared with modernism. They arise from the assumption is that there is *a* system to oppose. Assuming that there is *a* system, and that "it" is the source of power, makes one extremely powerless. If, as for naive post-moderns, the system is "out there," then it cannot be changed because it has all of the power, more or less by initial hypothesis. All one can do is protest this state of affairs, recognizing that one is powerless in doing so. On the other hand, if one views oneself as part of the system, as sophisticated post-moderns do, then there would also seem to be no way to change things because one is already complicitous, already a continuing co-dependent who can only play a role within the system that one is caught in. Post-modernism, in short, leads to the

powerless position of mere protest against a system one cannot change or to a sort of self/other protest that would seem to be destined to be equally ineffective.

These difficulties hinge on the modernist (and post-modernist) assumption that there is *a* system. But what if there is no there there? What if there is no it, no system, but merely various agents, themselves changing, engaged in an interaction whose patterns are also changing? What if James is right in his suggestion that the universe--including our own social life--is *already* pluralistic and unfinished?

Back to Darwin

What I find striking about both modern and post-modern theory is the way in which the assumptions of both are pre-Darwinian. Darwin's The Origin of Species was, of course, about changes in forms, in *species* (Darwin, 1993/1859). (The word "species" being the Latin for the Greek word for "form.").[4] It was about how the forms of things change. Modernist theories, and all mechanical theories in general, assume that forms are given. They assume that the system under analysis and its rules of operation are fixed. So whatever system is being analyzed cannot really develop or evolve because the whole analysis would then be impossible.

As just suggested, post-modernism is also pre-Darwinian in that it does not truly understand how one form may evolve into another. It also assumes that there is some system in place, although it reacts against this system, continually trying to undermine and disrupt it. But this approach is equally fixated on a given system, despite the fact that it sees discourse as plural and open. It has value as a protest against current conditions, but would seem unable to lead to new conditions because it does not accept any of the tendencies in the current situation. It does not see how the seeds of a desired future, the movement of change in current forms, are present in current conditions. By being so fixed in what it opposes, it leads one to act as though nothing new can be built.

If one adopted something more like a Darwinian view, as I believe James did, then one might see us as busily engaged in trying to create better lives in an uncertain and changing world in which our ways of thinking are among the tools of adaptation. Rather than taking things as given, as defined by a set of rules, or assuming that one must rebel

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[4] Note that this whole discussion has been greatly influenced by Mead's essay, "Evolution Becomes a General Idea" (Mead, 1964).

against all such rules, we can then use different sets of rules to aid our own adaptation. Of course it will be true that we are in many ways made by our own rules. Our minds and our bodies are formed by the social practices that we create, and social norms and bureaucratic rules are parts of these practices. But in a world in which there are many such rules, many languages or ways of thinking, there will be variety and some ability to get perspective on some of our own currently embedded habits by interacting with those who have different ones.

In short, if we can see theorizing as a tool for change we may not be so prone to modern passivity or post-modern powerlessness. Maybe James was right after all, that accepting life in a dynamic and uncertain world, full of alternative possibilities, is what makes life worth living. And maybe that is the world we are already in, so we can begin living whenever we are up to the challenge. This would mean that schooling might again be thought able to contribute to a better life. Just how to do this is not the subject of this paper, but it would seem that theories that give no choice other than fine-tuning a given system, or reacting against it, will not be much help. Seeing ourselves, once again, as capable of using education to help improve social life would seem to be a necessary piece. This would be much more likely if the notion that the world is *already* pluralistic and evolving gained wider acceptance. Or as James would have suggested, this is at least an hypothesis worthy of further consideration.

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